# Intelligence Report

*Office of Asian Pacific and Latin American Analysis* *31 August 1998*

## Colombia: Paramilitaries Assuming a Higher Profile [redacted]

***In recent months, Colombia's paramilitary groups have launched a series of high-profile operational and political activities, establishing themselves as a force to be reckoned with in any effort to bring peace to the country.***

- In May, the groups committed two widely publicized massacres, leaving dozens dead and wounded.
- As part of an apparent two-tiered strategy for increasing their profile, key paramilitary leaders have moved aggressively on the political front, publicly pledging to support the peace process—under certain conditions—and adopt rules of engagement aimed at humanizing the decades-old conflict with the insurgents. [redacted]

***The confluence of several factors is apparently spurring the paramilitaries to expand their activities.***

- [redacted] they are seeking to increase their influence to ensure they are on an equal footing with the guerrillas during peace negotiations with the new Pastrana administration.
- Local press reports indicate that paramilitary leaders also view their recent attacks as a signal to the Colombian public that they are independent from—and more effective than—the military, which has fared poorly in clashes with the guerrillas in recent years. [redacted]

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**Stepping Up Operations** [redacted]

A series of recent bold actions by paramilitary groups has refocused domestic attention on their growing influence and fueled—in conjunction with the latest surge of guerrilla activity—a climate of widespread insecurity:

- On 16 May, the paramilitaries staged a daring attack on the river port of Barrancabermeja, killing 11 people and kidnapping more than 20 others; the kidnap victims were subsequently executed. The audacity of the attack, which occurred in an area with a heavy guerrilla presence and was forewarned a year earlier, left many wondering whether Colombia is on the verge of another period of intense paramilitary violence against guerrillas and their alleged sympathizers.

- Also in May, 200 paramilitaries entered the village of Puerto Alvira in eastern Colombia and executed more than 20 villagers they accused of being guerrilla supporters; they also destroyed businesses, electrical plants, and dynamited the town's airstrip.

- In addition, the paramilitaries are widely believed, according to various sources, to be responsible for the assassination of two top human rights activists in Bogota in April. [redacted]

Recent paramilitary activity highlights the groups' increasing operational clout. [redacted] their strength has expanded in recent years, to the point that some of the more powerful groups are now able to project themselves into guerrilla-dominated areas in eastern and southern Colombia, which would have been difficult to imagine only a few years ago. [redacted]

The recent attacks and the government's inability to curb the paramilitary threat also have triggered sharp domestic and international criticism. A recent report issued by a prominent Latin American human rights group accused the paramilitaries of being the leading human rights violator in Colombia and blamed the security forces for complicity in the paramilitaries' activities. In reaction, the government has begun an investigation of at least three Army generals, a junior officer, and nine soldiers

[redacted]

accused of having links to the paramilitaries.[1] Following the Barrancabermeja massacre, the Secretary General of Amnesty International condemned the Samper administration for being indifferent—and possibly even criminally negligent—in failing to safeguard the public. [redacted]

Paramilitary activity has also exacerbated the problem of internal displacement caused by the long-running insurgency. [redacted] paramilitary activity is among the chief causes of the growing number of internal refugees, which have totaled more than 500,000 over the past four years. [redacted]

**Looking for Political Legitimacy (C NF)**

As part of an apparent two-tiered strategy to raise their profile and gain recognition as a legitimate political actor, the paramilitaries also are moving aggressively on the political front. In late July, Carlos Castano—Colombia's most notorious paramilitary leader—and more than a dozen other senior leaders signed a widely publicized agreement with leaders of civil society—including businessmen, church officials, and local political leaders—in which they pledged to support the peace process and laid out rules of military engagement that were ostensibly in line with international humanitarian law. As a precondition for their participation in peace negotiations, the groups also demanded the establishment of a demilitarized zone in northern Colombia. Castano's demands were similar to those laid out previously by the guerrilla groups, highlighting the desire of both his group and the paramilitaries' umbrella organization—the United Self-Defense Groups of Colombia (AUC)—to be granted the same political status as the insurgents; it also highlighted, according to some local political pundits, the groups' apparent lack of a well-thought-out political agenda. [redacted]

In late May, paramilitary leaders also held a high-profile summit—their second such event in the past two years—aimed at consolidating their organizational structure and influence. This event received considerable media play, particularly the groups' subsequent announcement that three new factions were being incorporated into the AUC. They also reiterated their demand that the government recognize the AUC as a political actor and not a criminal one. [redacted]

**Why Now?** [redacted]

The confluence of a few key factors is apparently spurring the paramilitaries to step up their activities. [redacted] they are clearly seeking to expand their political influence in an effort to ensure that they are on an equal footing with

[redacted]

the guerrillas during peace negotiations with the new administration. Indeed, by publicly endorsing the peace process, the paramilitaries are attempting to portray themselves as legitimate political actors and not the vigilantes and military surrogates that the guerrillas have long accused them of being. [redacted]

At the same time, according to local press reports, some leaders view their recent actions as a way to signal to the Colombian public that they are independent from—and more effective than—the armed forces, which have suffered a series of humiliating defeats at the hands of the guerrillas over the past two years. Castano echoed this theme during a recent press interview in which he vigorously maintained that the AUC is not an organ of the state and that it will disband only when key conditions—such as an end to guerrilla subversion and the inefficiency of the state—are met. [redacted]

**Paramilitary Influence Likely To Grow** [redacted]

The paramilitaries are already a significant force to be reckoned with, and, barring a major breakthrough in the peace process, which under the best of circumstances is likely to be a long and difficult endeavor, their influence is likely to continue increasing in the months ahead:

- The growing public perception that the military is losing the war against the guerrillas, coupled with the recent wave of guerrilla violence throughout the country, is likely to increase support for the groups, particularly in rural areas where the guerrillas operate.

- Clashes between the guerrillas and paramilitaries are likely to increase, particularly as the latter attempt to extend their influence and operations into areas controlled by the insurgents.

- Recognizing the need to boost their popular appeal, paramilitary leaders also are likely to continue their public relations offensive, simultaneously stressing their willingness to cooperate with the administration in peace negotiations while vigorously defending their right to be afforded political status.

- Meanwhile, some senior military officers—already suspicious of the peace process and frustrated with the military's [redacted] performance on the battlefield—may increasingly view turning a blind eye—and perhaps even offering tacit support to—the paramilitaries as their best option for striking back at the guerrillas. As a result, informational links and instances of active coordination between the military and the paramilitaries are likely to continue and perhaps even increase. [redacted]

Efforts by the groups' leadership to establish a more formal, consolidated organization are likely to make only limited progress for the foreseeable future. In many cases, long standing personal rivalries between key paramilitary leaders and the widely divergent objectives of the various groups will probably preclude the creation of a coherent leadership structure. As a result, most groups are likely to continue operating primarily as "guns for hire," with such disparate functions as providing protection to cattle ranchers and acting as armed guards for narcotics groups. In many instances, such as in the high-profile massacre in Mapiripan last year, these groups will probably become involved in violent clashes with guerrilla sympathizers for reasons having to do more with "turf" issues, including conflicts over the control of illicit activities, than their stated aim of eliminating the guerrillas or countering the insurgent threat.[2] [redacted]

**Implications for the United States** [redacted]

The growth of the paramilitaries and the possibility of increasingly violent clashes with the insurgents—particularly if the nascent peace process breaks down—risks undercutting the key US goal of improving Colombia's human rights record, which is already among the worst in the Americas. Moreover, although paramilitary groups have thus far refrained from attacking US citizens and facilities, US citizens—particularly those working with human rights groups in remote areas of northern Colombia—are at increased risk of being targeted as guerrilla sympathizers or of being unintended victims of violence should paramilitary and guerrilla fighting escalate. [redacted]

The growing influence of the paramilitaries also complicates the key US objective of advancing the peace process. Although many local political analysts argue that the groups must be included in future negotiations in light of their growing clout, their lack of a coordinated and coherent political program, weak organizational discipline, and the guerrillas' continuing refusal to participate in negotiations with them will hamper efforts to reach a comprehensive and long lasting agreement. Illustrative of this fact, one of the main insurgent groups—the Army of National Liberation—recently canceled a scheduled meeting with key members of civil society because of concern that the paramilitaries would be accorded political status. [redacted]

At the same time, powerful paramilitary leaders' involvement in or links to narcotics trafficking could pose an increasingly potent challenge to US antinarcotics interests. For example, late last year, paramilitaries acting as guards for a truck carrying cocaine were involved in a shootout with police, resulting in the death of 11 law enforcement officers. [redacted]

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[2] As a general rule, paramilitaries appear to receive less money from the drug trade than the guerrillas because of the guerrillas greater involvement in narcotics activity and their ability to cover a larger territory. [redacted]

**Colombia: Paramilitary High-Profile Activities Since October 1997** [redacted]

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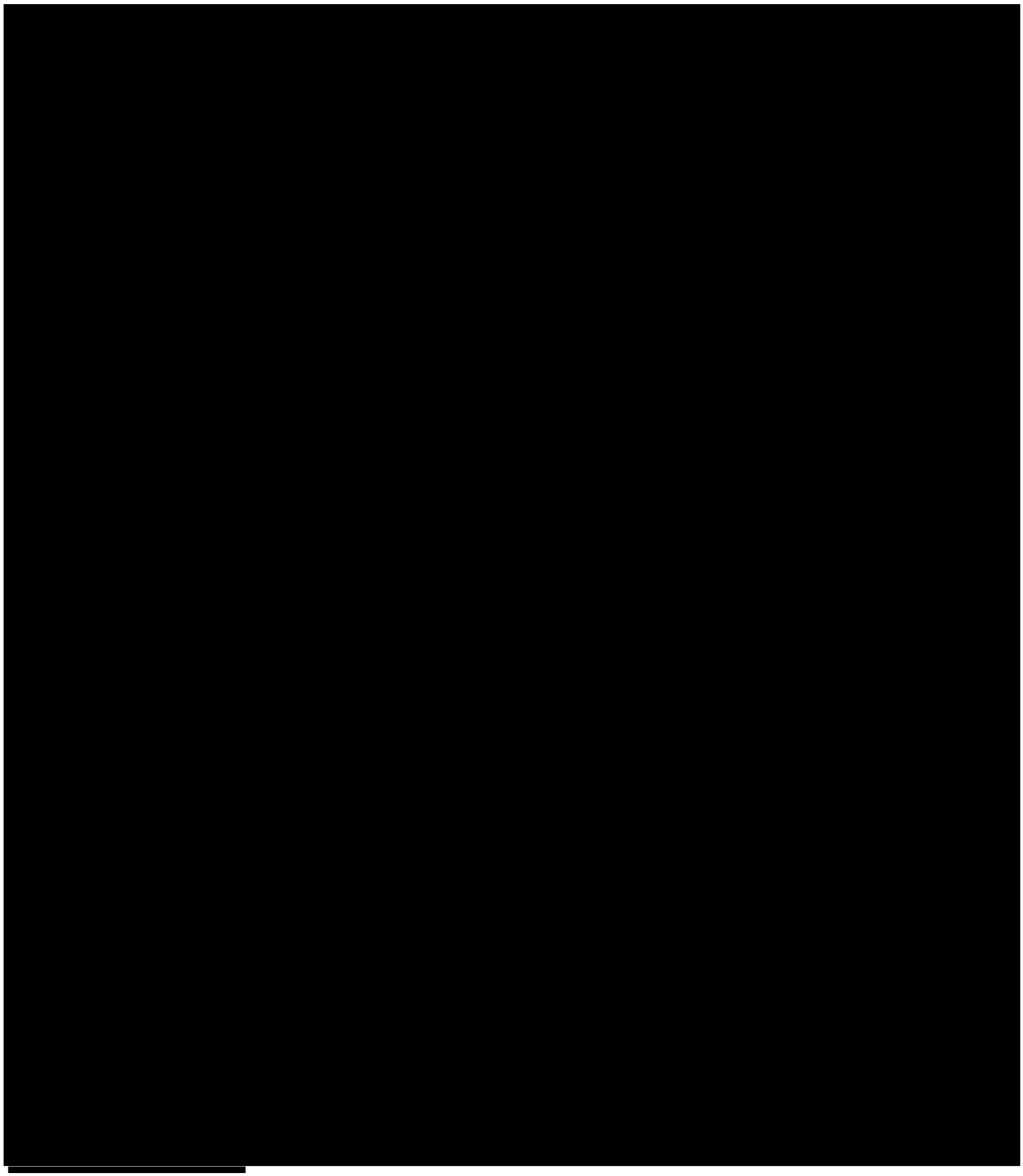

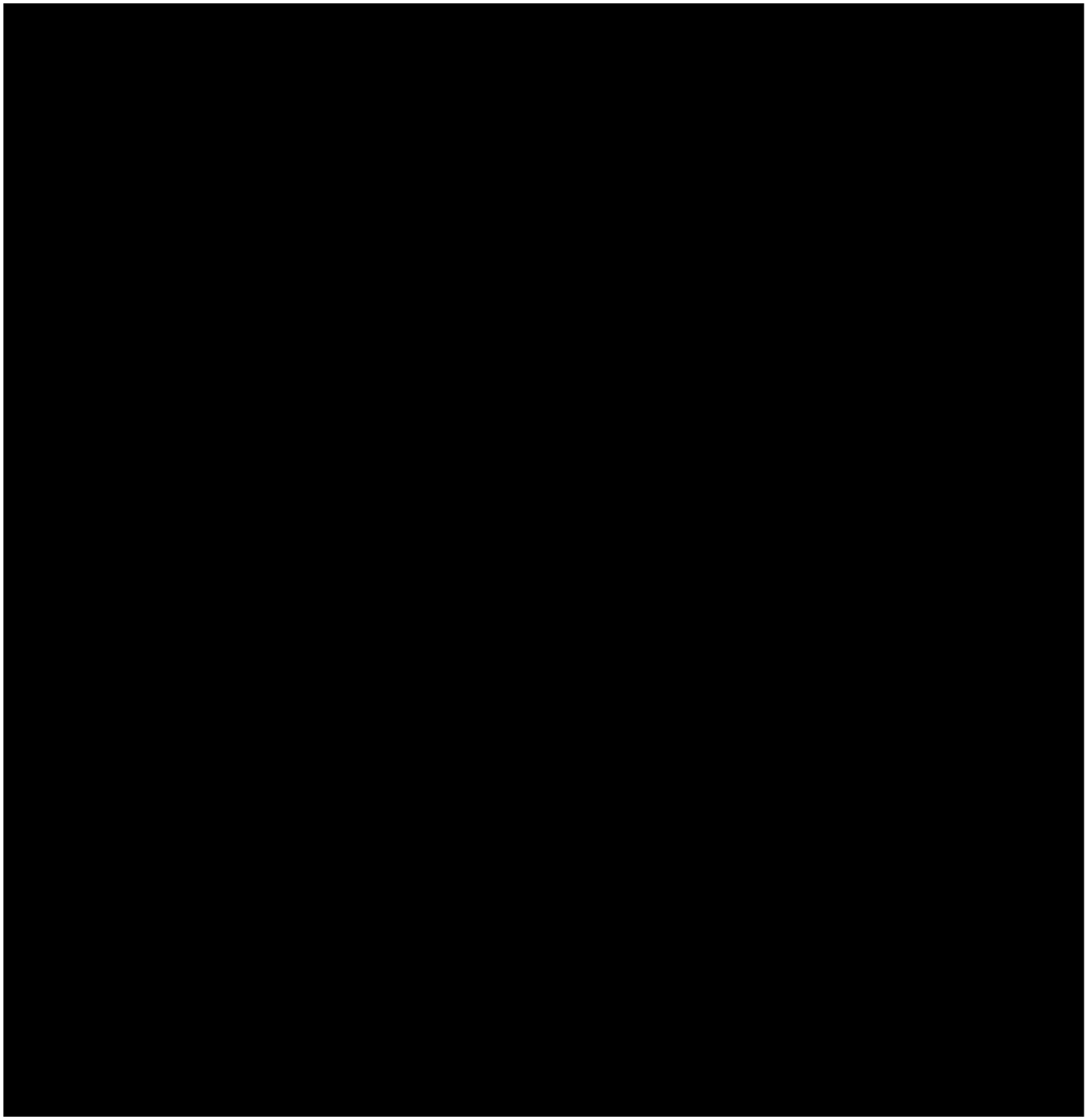

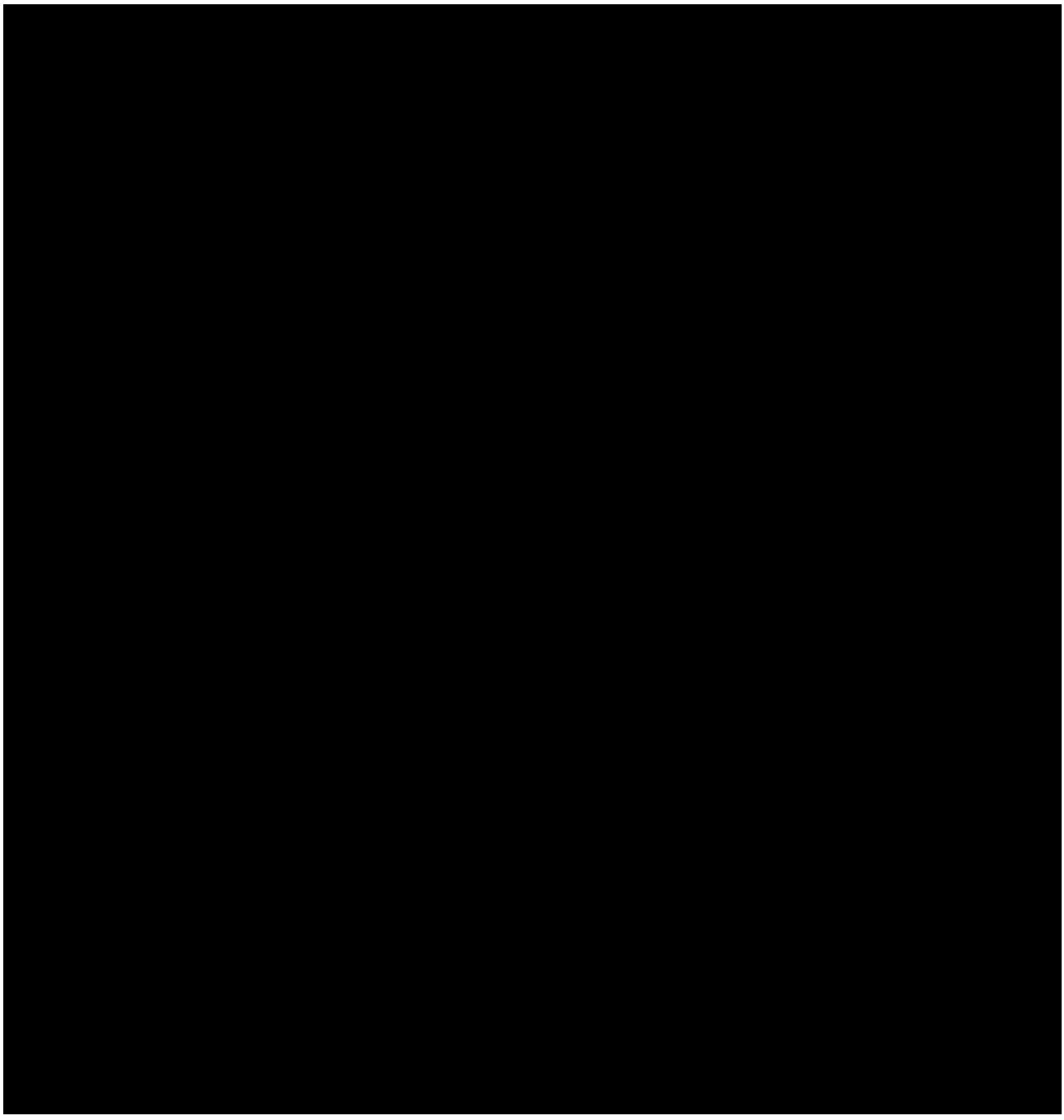

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# Colombia: Paramilitaries Assuming a Higher Profile [redacted]

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